

The last word The politics of editing, part one

by the Editors

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Because the editing process and financing of a publication normally remain hidden behind the finished issue, our readers, unlike ourselves, may think of JUMP CUT only in terms of its articles and the paper's physical format. To demystify the process of putting out an independent publication and to help explain to our readers the "hidden factors" behind JUMP CUT's operation, this and several more editorials will be devoted to indicating how the interplay of practical and political considerations shapes what you read.

When you receive JUMP CUT in the mail or pick it up off a magazine display, it comes to you as a finished product, a commodity on sale in the marketplace. Like all commodities under capitalism, it appears in a mystified way—that is, the work that went into it by writers, staff, typists, printers, postal workers, and others is erased. Often we find that because our readers buy, subscribe to, or "consume" JUMP CUT like other publications, they assume that we must therefore operate like other publications. Thus some people expect that we must have offices, secretaries, salaried editors, a big budget, and so forth. But in fact we do not have any of that. Visitors often find us, to their surprise, doing the layout for the next issue on the kitchen table. Writers sometimes discover that their articles move slowly through JUMP CUT's editing process because at times the editors have had to slow down editing activity in order to work to earn money to help pay for printing the next issue.

Like other film publications in the US, JUMP CUT can only exist within the network of U.S. capitalist relations. We deliberately use a relatively inexpensive format—offset tabloid printing from typewriter-prepared copy—because we think it is important to keep our selling price as low as possible to reach the many people who can use what we print. Working with a modest format also means we can subsidize the publication

ourselves and thus maintain a critical, independent political perspective.

Of course, we still have to depend on sales to be able to exist. That seems obvious, but, in fact, our dependence on sales creates in our practice certain contradictions between our political goals and the way we confront economic necessity. For example, our cover attracts newsstand buyers. It is what helps persuade them to buy the issue. Now, although we clearly have a commitment not to deal critically with commercial entertainment films, we would also like to give as much critical attention to—and support of—Third World and independent U.S. film. Yet we have found from experience that when the cover and the lead article deal with a recent and popular U.S. or Western European film, we sell substantially more issues on newsstands. Politically we find it a good idea to feature criticism of a film many people have seen—they can discuss the article with friends and judge its value against their own experience of the film. But the cover position also valorizes the film, already established as popular by commercial norms. This places an inordinate emphasis on the lead article because of the conventions of U.S. commercial publishing. Some readers have criticized this practice in JUMP CUT, pointing out that it then relegates independent left or feminist films to a “less important” place in the issue than, say, LIFEGUARD.

Clearly there is a vicious circle here. At this point in history, a left film, no matter how famous, does not have enough “pull” to attract the occasional buyer of JUMP CUT whom we depend on to keep publishing. So our political ideal of focusing critical attention on independent and Third World film has to be carried out “inside” JUMP CUT and these articles will most likely never make it to the cover position. We literally cannot afford to break the circle.

At the same time, political considerations do affect our covers. We receive many sexist publicity stills for films (and frequently no good stills for films we'd like to feature). We see many film publications, such as *Film Quarterly*, that frequently run gratuitously sexist covers—obviously to boost sales—and we reject such a practice. Nor do we think of critics as stars and run their names on the cover to appeal to the cognoscenti, as does *Film Comment*. Our readership is mixed—drawing in film enthusiasts and students, radicals, and filmmakers primarily—and we want to use our covers as a way of drawing readers by appealing to their interests and intelligence.

When we started in 1974, we knew that we would always be short of money (called in fancy terms “undercapitalization”) as a concomitant of maintaining our political and critical independence. Institutions lend material support (such as money, office space, postage, typing, etc.). The National Endowment, state arts councils, and foundations all give grants. Advertisers pay for ads. And individual angels give donations

only under certain conditions, and they can withdraw the support at any time. The one who pays the piper calls the tune. Most film publications operate with such support. For example, American Film is subsidized by taxpayers through the American Film Institute, Cinema (the U.S. one) has a patron, *Filmmaker's Newsletter* receives substantial advertising from equipment and service sellers, and other publications depend on grants. As most filmmakers know, this dependent situation also produces a kind of censorship. When and if filmmakers or editors embark on an expensive project, they know they must face these hassles. Furthermore, when a cultural project becomes used to operating at an inflated financial level, that project often disappears when the "extra" outside money stops coming in. Knowing this, we set out at the beginning to devise a magazine we could produce and support ourselves because we believed a modest, but stable, long term publication was more important than a spectacular short-lived one.

Our particular form of printing is cheap because it serves a special function under capitalism—advertising for small businesses and producing such ephemeral publications as suburban newspapers. Some of us learned how to use this "bargain basement" of the printing business while putting out underground newspapers, and we passed along the skill to others on the JUMP CUT staff. Of course, "cheap" is a relative term. The issue you have here cost about \$1,600 to print (5000 copies, or about 32 cents each). We have additional expenses for editorial work, production materials and services, postage, and so forth. Bookstores receive a discount price, so our return is pretty slim. In fact, subscriptions bring in more money per issue sold than sales through dealers. We've thought of changing our price for individual subs and single copies to reflect that difference, but we want to get JUMP CUT to as many people as possible. Our recent move to a better grade of paper may increase sales, but we will need more time for that to happen. It takes years for a publication to build up a loyal following and a stable base of institutional and individual subscribers which provide a guaranteed, regular income.

It takes hundred of hours of donated labor a week to edit, produce, promote, and distribute JUMP CUT. In addition to time, the staff contributes about 30% of the total income needed to keep going. The fact that we have a volunteer staff is an obvious material condition shaping the process of our production. Everyone involved in JUMP CUT does some kind of other work to earn a living. Some of us can donate money and working spaces; others donate their labor. Those editors who do not live in Chicago or the San Francisco Bay area, where production and distribution is done, receive and critique manuscripts, solicit articles, and help with distribution in their geographic area.

A typical staff work session usually has present people who work on JUMP CUT on a regular basis—Sunday being the usual JUMP CUT

“work day.” During that time, people read and critique manuscripts, write letters to authors, prepare manuscripts for the typists, proofread, do layout and other production work, check the final version before printing, stuff envelopes with the new issue or pack boxes for mailing to bookstores, and so on. Although these are the stages of an issue, many of them occur simultaneously, since manuscripts come in on a regular basis and are in various stages of process at any given time. Usually after working separately for several hours, the members of the group, gathered together at someone’s house or apartment that day, all get together to discuss new manuscripts collectively, deciding to accept or reject or ask for revisions. Plans for JUMP CUT, editorial policy, and criticism/ self-criticism of our group process are also discussed.

Most left projects work under similar conditions. Labor-intensive and short of capital, without a big advertising budget, we cannot do the kind of promotional campaign we should do to reach all the people who would read JUMP CUT if they knew about it. We’ve become expert at cutting corners and at filling hallways, closets, shelves and every other available space with back issues, correspondence, and layout material since we must use our living space for offices. We do almost all of JUMP CUT ourselves. If we could pay to have more things done, we could spend more time editing, going to festivals and conferences, doing research in neglected areas, and writing articles ourselves (especially more on independent radical film, which is a long term goal). But for the foreseeable future, our desires are mixed with economic constraints.

The interaction of political and pragmatic concerns defines our day-to-day practice as well as our long range work. From the start we wanted to reach a broad audience and bridge the usual gaps between committed radicals and non-leftists, between filmmakers and critics, between teachers and other cultural workers, between film people and people working in other media and arts. While wanting to reach a more diversified audience than the usual film magazine, we decided not to water down our politics, but to argue for them in the magazine and in relations with each other and with our readers and writers. To the extent we’ve been able to do this (and we believe we can do even better to reach our goal), JUMP CUT has had a politics developed in practice, not simply out of abstract theorizing and proclamation. This means as well learning to listen—to writers, to each other and the staff, to readers. Thus we’ve had feedback sessions with subscribers in the Bay Area and New York City, and we plan more. Thus often times our most important editorial work occurs in the hidden form of struggling among ourselves or with our writers to mutually learn, change, and grow—a subject that we’ll discuss in following editorials.

With regard to these political and economic realities, there are many ways in which readers can participate in and support JUMP CUT. The financial ones are obvious: subscribe, keep your sub up to date, tell us

when you move (it costs us money if you don't), get your friends to subscribe, use JUMP CUT, tell us about likely bookstores, and, of course, send us a donation if you can afford it. But much more importantly, we want you to engage us on a political level. Send us your criticisms, take issue with our reviews, articles, and editorials, offer alternative views. We want to be in touch with people who use media in their political work, with people who are using JUMP CUT in classes and study groups, with people making political films. We want to know how JUMP CUT could become more useful.

In short, the contradiction between our political goals and the everyday economic realities of publishing produces a tension—sometimes an exhausting one, but often a creative and vibrant one. We've learned that people—writers, staff, readers—are the most important condition shaping the present and future of JUMP CUT and that people—even when working with severely limited time, money, and other resources—make a difference. Together we can begin and continue the changes that must come about to build a humane socialist society.

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